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ABSTRACT

Televised sexuality is examined in the context of gender stereotypes for three recent, "new adult" programs which have been billed as departures from traditional treatments of sex roles and/or sexuality: "All That Glitters," "Soap," and "We've Got Each Other." Using these examples, the paper focuses on three main areas: (1) characters and settings are described with reference to sex roles on television; (2) interpersonal relations between women and men are examined; and (3) sex and gender are analyzed in reference to sex stereotypes in television characters and their interaction.

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MEN AND WOMEN ON THE TUBE:

SEX AND SEX-STEREOTYPES ON TELEVISION

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2

ABSTRACT

Televised sexuality is examined in the context of gender stereotypes for three recent programs. Sex on television is usually implicit and -- more important -- unenjoyable for television characters. Since the sexes are portrayed in stereotyped roles, even when the intention is "role-reversal", and often exploit each other, it is not surprising that televised sex is not much fun.

"Journalism is a lot more than blood and sex."
Doris Day to Clark Gable in "Teacher's Pet".

The outcry of concern over violence and sex on television today seems hardly to have progressed from "Teacher's Pet" nearly 20 years ago. However, this paper does not deal with the number of televised sexual episodes on television nor their explicitness. In fact, it is fair to say that there is very little explicit sex currently on television (e.g., Franks, et al., 1977). Even on the program "Soap", roundly criticized for sexual explicitness before its premiere, there is little explicit sex -- despite continual chatter from "Soap" characters on the topic. At this point, televised sexuality eerily resembles early 1960's movies and more explicit programs than "Soap" have already appeared on public television (e.g., "Foldark" during early 1977) with almost no adverse publicity.

Rather, this paper concerns whether and how the "new adult" programs of the late 1970's portray sexuality as part of a gender stereotyped and segregated world. Obviously, sex is one of the most intimate relationships that can occur between women and men. However, sex on television can appear in different guises, from an affair deeply intertwined into the rest of the characters' lives to a "TV dinner quickie". Thus, the perspective here resembles content analyses of gender stereotypes in children's books (e.g., Weitzman, et al., 1972), pornography (e.g., Smith, 1976), or everyday interaction (e.g., Henley, 1977). I am especially interested in how three programs during 1977 depart from or reinforce traditional gender patterns: the short-lived Norman Lear comedy, "All That Glitters"; ABC's "Soap"; and CBS' "We've Got Each Other".

These three programs were selected for several reasons. First, all are

aimed at adults. The syndicated "All That Glitters" was usually shown in the late evenings, "Soap" carries messages about "parental discretion", while the themes of "We've Got Each Other" are aimed more at adults than children. Second, these programs were billed as a departure from traditional treatments of sex roles and/or sexuality. "Soap" has been designated the first prime time series to feature sexuality. "All That Glitters" was extensively advertised as a "sex-role reversal" comedy. "We've Got Each Other" has also been described as a role-reversal comedy (although less extreme than "All That Glitters"). Third, each series has featured some sexuality, from the explicit dialogue in "Soap", the constant sexual conquests in "All That Glitters" to the wedded couple on "We've Got Each Other". Thus in many ways, these programs have been viewed as harbingers of the future of sex and sex-roles on television.

Using these examples, this paper focuses on three main areas. First, the characters and settings will be described with reference to sex roles on television. The second area concerns interpersonal relations between women and men. Finally, sex and gender are examined in reference to sex stereotypes in television characters and their interaction.

GENDER ROLES ON TELEVISION

Certainly, the United States is a gender segregated society in many ways. Ample research documents polarized stereotypes of the sexes in all segments of the population, sex-typed labor markets, and segregated leisure activities (see Hesselbart, forthcoming, for a review). Nevertheless, television exaggerates this segregation -- even when its intent is to do the reverse.

Several studies have addressed gender roles in the mass media. Unlike most American women in the late 1970's, few female television characters are employed, although, oddly enough, employed television women work at jobs largely occupied by men in "real life". On commercials, women are the face -- but not the voice -- that sells products. Women are relatively likely to be victims, but not perpetrators of violent crime. And, women on television are younger and more physically attractive than their male counterparts (see, e.g., Isber and Cantor, 1975; Gerbner, et al., 1977).

What happens when commercial television tries to be innovative in gender roles? As we shall see below, the "new" programs are still imprisoned by stereotypes.

"All That Glitters" explicitly stressed sex-role reversal. In this series, women were employed and men stayed at home. Within the work world, women were professionals and managers; employed men were secretarial and service staff. Men viewed for female attention, for marriage and for security, while the "masculinized" women ignored their families and thought only of business and sexual conquest. After only a few months, this series folded. According to some television critics, the viewing public was not ready for a role-reversal comedy.

However, "All That Glitters" only changed the surface of gender-stereotyping. Stereotypically, husbands or boyfriends were usually older than their wives or girlfriends. Women executives acted short-tempered and bitchy. Women mused in bars for long scenes about the characteristics and relationships of their boyfriends -- again more in line with feminine than masculine stereotypes. And, as discussed below, the more subtle aspects of interpersonal

dominance between the sexes remained unchanged.

"We've Got Each Other" is a "softer" version of role-reversal. Judy Hibbard is an office manager for a temperamental photographer. Her husband, Stewart, is a "househusband" who cooks and cleans while Judy goes out to work. However, Stewart is employed (writing mailorder catalogues), and, moreover "takes Judy out to eat". Meanwhile, Judy is the emotional one, losing her temper easily and concerned about her attractiveness to men (Stewart, meanwhile, feels he is already attractive to women).

"Soap" makes no pretense at role-reversal, but, if anything, emerges as more insulting to both sexes than most of prime time television. First, nearly every character is incompetent.¹ Seemingly wealthy Chester Tate is poor at business and stoops to shady practices. His wife is easily deceived about Chester's affairs, her daughter's affairs, and her son's pornography collection. Women are generally stereotyped as peabrains, manipulators, or nymphomaniacs (one exception is Mary Campbell). The men are reduced to throwing food (which the women clean up). Homosexuals are stereotyped as transsexuals desiring sex-change operations and Mary's son is a drag queen who looks better than his mother in dresses.

My point is not that television should have programs on role-reversal or sexuality. Rather, it is that these "departures" from traditionalism are trapped by stereotypic writing and directing. For example, men on "All That Glitters" usually portrayed the most negative female stereotypes -- frumpy

¹Incompetence may, however, simply be a characteristic of most characters in television situation comedies.

housewives, dilettantes, sexual manipulators. Female characters did not portray any more flattering portraits of men -- Don Juan^s, unconcerned fathers, or heartless businessmen. Reverse such stereotypes back to their traditional gender and the characters on "Soap" emerge. Even on "We've Got Each Other," more gentle in tone, Judy is a totally incompetent cook who burns toast and opens bacon with her teeth (a common stereotype of men at home) and Stewart's work is not to be taken seriously.

Television does not yet seem capable of portraying an "androgynous" world (e.g., see Ben, 1975) in which characters combine both desirable male and female traits. Versions of "role-reversal" which tacitly accept traditional gender stereotypes appear to be television's answer to greater sex-role egalitarianism. We shall see below that dominance patterns between the sexes are also traditional, again, even when "role-reversal" is the program topic.

DOMINANCE AND GENDER ON TELEVISION

In American society, the sexes are not only considered to be very different from each other, but men are usually expected to dominate women. Domination can be explicit, as in the male commercial characters who tell women how to do wash or when women are employees but rarely the boss. However, more subtle dominance relations are also expressed in mixed-sex interaction.

Researchers such as Henley (1977) focus on nonverbal gestures that convey dominance. For example, status superiors (employers, parents) touch status inferiors (employees, children) far more frequently than the reverse. Setting conversational topics or interrupting others also signifies status. Superiors are more likely to "first-name" inferiors than the other way around.

Dominance patterns on programs such as "All That Glitters," provide further insight on why "role-reversal" television never quite seems realistic. While who earns the money or who keeps house may be gender-interchanged, more subtle patterns of sex-status continue. The result is jarring to those who consciously or nonconsciously are aware of dominance between men and women.

Take, for example, "All That Glitters". Continually, male secretaries casually touched their female bosses, while women touched men only in love, sex, or familial situations. Men interrupted women or introduced new conversational topics. While women sometimes lost interest, they tolerated these intrusions of personal space in a way that seldom occurs in traditional gender interaction (e.g., see West, 1977).

In "We've Got Each Other," it is Stewart who criticizes Judy's appearance or who persuades Judy to return to the job she quit. As in "The Mary Tyler Moore Show", Judy's boss calls her by her first name, although he is "Mr. Jerome". However, it is interesting to note that Judy is slightly taller than her husband -- a nonverbal detail that lends greater credence to this program's claims of "role-reversal".

Again, the argument is not that television should have more series on "role-reversal" (or even androgyny). However, the experiments tried to date are internally contradictory. If women are the status superiors ("All That Glitters", "We've Got Each Other"), they should be portrayed that way, both in demographics and in interpersonal interaction. Otherwise, the audience is at least subliminally aware that the characters and roles do not "fit".

Despite attempted innovation, television has fared poorly in its attempts to deal with traditional sex-roles. Stereotyped characters and dominance

patterns continue. It should come as no surprise that such trends also occur when television deals with sexuality. Since sexuality is one arena where cross-sex interaction is nearly a cultural mandate, these stereotypes become important in the rather melancholy portrayal of sex on television.

SEX AND SEX ROLES ON TELEVISION

An important issue in television violence concerns what viewers learn from filmed hostility. For example, increased television viewing correlates with a "jungle world" perspective in which others are untrustworthy (e.g., Gerbner and Gross, 1974; Gerbner, et al., 1977). The debate on television aggression and subsequent viewer aggression is too long and well known to reproduce here. Given such attention to televised violence, it seems reasonable to wonder what lessons viewers receive about sexuality.

First, viewers certainly do not receive a sex manual. As mentioned earlier, televised sex is far more implicit than explicit. The programs discussed here are not exceptions. At most, characters embrace or are shown adjacent in bed. While "Soap" characters discuss sex, they do so in vague terms (e.g., "that glowing feeling" or "his you-know"). "Soap" hardly constitutes an action comedy.

Sex is generally unpleasant on these "new adult" comedies. Even while "Soap's" Jessica glows from her affair with a tennis instructor (who is also her daughter's lover), she is filled with guilt. Her attempts to confess to her husband fail, since he is engrossed with simultaneously juggling several affairs and is being blackmailed by his secretary (and ex-lover). Jessica's sister Mary must cope with an impotent husband who blames her for the impo-

tency. The sexual encounters on "All That Glitters" were similarly joyless. Male "sex objects" worried about their attractiveness, propriety, or "keeping score", while the female "aggressors" faced either one night stands or troublesome lovers. Sex is far from fun on television comedies.

Third, sex on these programs is usually a tool. Sex is used for blackmail, material gain, manipulation, or to reassure the participant about his/her physical attractiveness. Thus, sex is done to (or from) but rarely with others. Given such motives, it is no wonder that no one looks very happy.

On television comedies, sex also seems to provide one of the few opportunities for cross-sex interaction. In "All That Glitters", (besides affairs) cross-sex interaction was restricted to employer-employee relations or arguments between spouses. "Soap" is much the same. Outside of sex, blackmail, or spats, the sexes do not work, chat or play together. "We've Got Each Other" provides a partial contrast: Judy and Stewart are friends: they are able to convivially discuss everyday affairs as well as lounge in bed in identical pajamas.

To summarize then, televised sex is usually implicit and apparently not much fun for the participants. It is hard to see how the situation could be otherwise when sex is a manipulative strategy (often used by women or "role-reversed" men to gain power) and the sexes have little common ground (which would appear inevitable given the stereotyped characters). These are lessons to viewers that many of us deplore. But, certainly, televised sex appears to be far from the hedonistic orgies envisioned by some television critics and pressure groups.

CONCLUSIONS

"All That Glitters", "Soap", and "We've Got Each Other" were selected for discussion in this paper because each, in its own way, has been conceived as an innovation in television programming vis à vis sexuality and gender roles. Despite attempts at innovations, however, these programs are old wine in new bottles: traditional sex stereotypes and patterns of gender domination continue. The sex-typed inelasticity of the characters and their relations spill over into televised portrayal of sexuality. In a world in which women (or role-reversed men) must worry about security and lack of efficacy, using sex for manipulation seems logical. When women and men are portrayed as so different as to make friendship unlikely, joyous sexuality is also unlikely.

What can we expect in the future of television? Out in the "real world", the labor force participation of women and men is converging, people are divorcing more, and marrying and reproducing less. In its fashion, television is attempting to reflect such changes.

Whether or not "role-reversal" comedy or more explicit sexuality become television staples depend on how well these concepts "sell". "All That Glitters" had a short season and "We've Got Each Other" is doing very poorly in weekly ratings. In this paper, I have suggested that unattractive characters may be as important in the low success of these programs as the "role reversal" concept. In addition, the inconsistencies between concept and execution in these two programs renders the characters and situations unbelievable. "Soap", on the other hand, is currently a success, although a recent article stated that an attempt will be made to render the characters more three-dimensional.

It is a shame that television has done so comparatively little with the concepts of sexuality and sex roles. Both are certainly important issues and could be well-treated in humor. How a couple treats sexuality in the context of a caring relationship, or how to raise a family in a time of changes are two examples of topics that television comedy could address. But, with notable exceptions, prime time broadcasters have expended little imagination to explore such issues. In the future, I hope that they will try.

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